

The Ancient World As Seen By Afrocentrists

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Introduction

At some schools and universities in the USA today students are learning a version of ancient history that is strikingly different from what is being taught to their counterparts in Europe.[1] This new narrative cannot be reconciled with the traditional account, which is still being taught in the vast majority of schools and universities. Advocates of the revisionist version ("the Afrocentric narrative") claim that because of their inherent prejudice against Africans and peoples of African descent, the traditionalists have ignored a significant body of evidence. Advocates of the traditional version of ancient history insist that their version ("the Eurocentric narrative") offers the best available account of the known facts. Thus in the debate between the two groups there is more at stake than historical accuracy. There is a question of ethics as well: the traditionalists deserve to be discredited if they have misrepresented history, particularly if they have done so out of racist motives. But it also follows that the revisionists should be prepared to moderate their claims if they have misrepresented history or misunderstood the motives of the traditionalists.

In this article I shall offer a summary of the revisionist "Afrocentric" narrative, along with the traditional "Eurocentric" narrative that it is designed to replace. I shall then describe the evidence used to support each account, and attempt to explain where the advocates of each narrative have misunderstood the other, or have failed to pay sufficient attention to other possible interpretations. In the end, I shall argue that the Eurocentric Narrative offers the best representation of the known facts now available to us, and that the Afrocentric Narrative is based largely on an unscientific and now rightly discarded understanding of the nature of Egyptian civilization. But I wish to make it clear at the outset that I have not chosen the Eurocentric narrative out of a reluctance to imagine anything new, or out of a desire to misrepresent the achievements or capacities of African peoples.[2] Such motivations are both abhorrent to me, as they should be to all of us. Rather, I will insist that the Afrocentric narrative needs to be taken seriously by everyone who is interested in the ancient world. Despite its historical inaccuracies, the Afrocentric narrative reminds us of facts that have not been sufficiently emphasized in the study of ancient history: that the ancient Egyptians came originally from Africa and that their cultural and intellectual achievements in the second millennium were remarkable.

Here then are summaries of the two narratives:

The Afrocentric Narrative

1. *Prehistory*: All civilization derives from Africa, and in particular from the African civilization of Ancient Egypt. It was from ancient Egypt that language and culture spread to the rest of Africa. The Egyptians invented science, medicine and philosophy, and they taught it to other peoples.

2. *Second millennium B.C.*: It is also from ancient Egypt that language and culture came to ancient Greece. The Egyptians under the Hyksos pharaohs invaded the Near East, and then came to Greece. A memory of this invasion is preserved in the story of Danaus and his fifty daughters, who came from Egypt to Argos. While in Greece, the Egyptians exerted influence on Greek art, architecture, science, and language. They built step-pyramids in Thebes and Argos. They founded the Eleusinian mysteries. Egyptian motifs appear in Minoan and Mycenaean art, and Egyptian objects are found in Greek sites. Half of the vocabulary of ancient Greek derives from ancient Egyptian. Some Greeks, such as Socrates, had African ancestors.

3. *First millennium B.C.*: Famous Greeks came to Egypt to study at the universities in the Egyptian Mystery System (EMS): Homer learned about religion and Pythagoras about life and death and mathematics, Solon studied law, Thales science; Socrates and Plato philosophy; Oenopides, Democritus, and Eudoxus astronomy. In 332 B.C., when the Greeks invaded Egypt under Alexander the Great, Aristotle raided the library of Alexandria. Later he pretended to be the author of the Egyptian books he had stolen. Ancient Greek philosophy is in reality stolen Egyptian philosophy. The Greeks did not have the capacity to write philosophy, because they were a contentious people. Cleopatra VII's paternal grandmother was an African.

The Eurocentric Narrative

1. *Prehistory*: All human life appears to have originated in Africa, but in the course of thousands of years people migrated to other parts of the world. We know from recorded history that in the third millennium B.C. the ancient Egyptians had attained a high level of civilization. They had a system of writing, built impressive architectural structures, and were adept at certain types of mathematical calculation. They had theories about the operation of the human body, and recorded their methods for the use of other practitioners.

2. *Second millennium*: Invaders from the East began to settle in Asia Minor, the Aegean islands, and mainland Greece. The Egyptians were in contact with peoples in these areas and other early civilizations through trade. During

the hegemony of the Semitic "Hyksos" pharaohs, (ca. 1650-1550) Egyptians in Lower Egypt traded with Cyprus and Crete, and brought Minoan artists to Avaris, but here is no archaeological or linguistic evidence that Egyptians invaded mainland Greece or the islands.

3. *First millennium:* Trade continued with other Mediterranean countries, but in the mid-seventh century the pharaoh Psamtek I ("Psammetichus") used Greek mercenaries, and a base for Greek traders was established in the Nile Delta at Naucratis. In 570 B.C. the pharaoh Ahmose II ("Amasis") used Greek mercenaries, and in 548 B.C. financed the rebuilding of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. After the Persians conquered Egypt in 525 it was difficult for Greeks to travel there, but we know that in the fifth century the Greek historians Hecataeus and Herodotus went there; others Greeks, like Solon and Thales, may have visited there as well. Greeks lived in Egypt after Alexander's conquest, but stayed primarily in Alexandria and kept themselves separate from the native population. From 332 to 31 B.C., when Cleopatra VII was defeated by the Romans, all the pharaohs were Macedonian Greeks. Greeks founded the library at Alexandria in about 297 B.C. What we now know as Greek philosophy derived from the work of Greek thinkers in Asia Minor, and was developed in Athens by Socrates, his pupil Plato, and Plato's pupil Aristotle.

Discussion

I shall now explain what evidence is used to support the different narratives for each of the three periods outlined above. I have suggested in endnotes where fuller discussions of particular issues may be found.

1. *Prehistory*

Both the traditional and revisionist accounts agree that all civilization comes from Africa, and that the Egyptians originally were an African people. Where the accounts differ is in emphasis: the Afrocentric account stresses the connection of the Egyptians to the rest of Africa; the Eurocentrics concentrate on the connections of Egypt to the Eastern Mediterranean, a part of the world that is more important for the development of European history. The Afrocentrists also pay particular attention to the *racial* characteristics of the ancient Egyptians. According to them, the Egyptians are indistinguishable from other Africans. But the traditionalists point out that the Egyptians distinguished themselves from the Nubians and other African and Mediterranean peoples in appearance and dress. Both the traditionalists and revisionists express a high regard for Egyptian accomplishments in science, medicine, and architecture, fields that are highly valued in European culture, though the revisionist account makes claims for Egyptian science that cannot be substantiated by the documentary or archaeological evidence. For example, there is no evidence that Egyptians invented gliders, and flew around in them.[3] They did not understand the relation of the brain to the nervous system. Nor did they have a real grasp of the function of the circulatory system: they thought that the network of vessels that emanated from the heart terminated in the anus (Harris 1971, 125; Palter 1996, 256).

It is important to note that neither account pays much attention to the subject area which the ancient Egyptians thought themselves most important: the preparation of the individual for death and the afterlife. In this respect the focus of the Afrocentric narrative is as Eurocentric as the traditionalist narrative (Walker 2001, 128-129).

2. Second millennium

The revisionists argue that there was massive influence on Greece from Egypt in this period, brought as the result of an invasion of Greece by the Hyksos pharaohs. They believe that there is evidence of the invasion in the presence of many Egyptian word roots in Greek, and that the idea of an invasion is suggested by the story of Danaus and his fifty daughters, who came from Egypt to Greece and settled in Argos, and that the foundations of step-pyramids can be seen in Argos and in Thebes (Bernal 1991, 320-408, followed by Poe 1997, 323-26). The traditionalists have not been convinced by any of these arguments. They insist that Egyptian etymologies cannot be found for most Greek words, unless all known rules of vocabulary acquisition are disregarded (Jasanoff and Nussbaum 1996, 179-84). They say that the myth of Danaus proves nothing about an invasion, because it is a myth, not history, and merely suggests what archaeological evidence confirms, that there was contact between Egypt and Greece during this period (Vermeule 1996, 276-77; Coleman 1996, 281-84; Tritle 1996, 319-20). If the myth could be accepted as a historical account, it would also suggest that Greece invaded Egypt, since Danaus' ancestor Io came from Argos to Egypt and settled there (Lefkowitz 1996, 18-19). They point out that the remains of buildings identified by the revisionists as Egyptian have no distinctively Egyptian characteristics, and thus are almost certainly indigenous (Tritle 1996, 321-3). In particular, the structures known as "pyramids" in the neighborhood of Argos are located at some distance from each other; a careful study showed that they are in fact guard houses, dating at the earliest to the fifth century B.C. (Lord 1938, 481-527). The "pyramid" at Thebes is only a hill (Tritle 1996, 321-323).

Instead of the notion of invasion, the traditionalists believe that during this period there is evidence of increasing trade, and with it extensive cultural exchange among the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean. At this time also successive waves of peoples gradually filtered into the area who spoke an Indo-European language that later became the prototype of Greek. These people absorbed into their language some of the vocabulary of the native populations of the area, but the identity and origin of these earlier peoples is now unknown. Some more specific items of vocabulary were added to Greek through trade with the Phoenicians (Burkert 1992, 34-40; West 1997, 12-14). Archaeological evidence shows that the inhabitants of the Greek mainland traded with Egypt, and were inspired by Egyptian decorative art; but the Hyksos pharaohs admired the indigenous art of Crete and brought Cretan artisans to Egypt to create wall paintings for buildings at Avaris in the Nile delta (Bietak 1996, 81). Since virtually no Egyptian words appear to have been absorbed into Greek at this period, it seems likely that there were no major exchanges of population, wars, or invasions between Greek and Egyptian peoples (Jasanoff 1997, 63-66).

The evidence supports the traditional account, provided that traditional methods are employed in analyzing the available data. But the revisionists insist that traditional means of acquiring knowledge are all subject to question, especially if the motives of the producers of such "knowledge" can be regarded as one-sided or even racist in intention. Since no human being can be truly objective, isn't it possible that the traditional methodology has been designed either inadvertently or deliberately to "protect" the data from alternative explanations? Why can't myth represent history in this case, even if it does not in most other cases? How do we know that the same rules for adopting foreign loan-words into Greek apply to all languages in the same way? Couldn't the Egyptian words have been transformed in a somewhat different way from, say, Phoenician words?

To some extent the revisionists' skepticism appears justified: certainly classical scholars have tended to concentrate more on the development of Greek culture during this period than they have on the development of other cultures. No modern scholar of the ancient world is opposed to the notion of a strong African influence on Greece *in principle*. Rather, the problem is that there is no evidence, either linguistic or archaeological, that supports the notion. For example, there is no reason to assume that the Danaus myth is any more "historical" than the Oedipus or any other myth. Scholars have known for more than a century the rules by which Egyptian loan words are brought into Greek, and have already catalogued such loan words as can be found (Wiedemann 1883; Jasanoff and Nussbaum 1996, 201-3). In any case, if it is true that the nature of knowledge is determined by the intentions of the providers of knowledge, then the revisionists' arguments also will be undermined by their own intentions. If they are determined to claim priority for African civilizations, as their approach to the evidence suggests, how can they in their turn be expected to offer a fair and unbiased account of the development of Greek civilization?

3. *First millennium*

The traditionalists believe that before the sixth century B.C., encounters between Egypt and Greece were limited, though Greeks traveled there, and served as mercenaries under Ahmose II in 570B.C. They set up a trading post at Naucratis in the Nile Delta. Here they appear to have followed a Mesopotamian practice, since there were trading posts along the Egyptian border (Dalley and Reyes 1998, 97). But Greek contact with Egypt was restricted after the time of the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 B.C. until Alexander's invasion in 333/2. Herodotus was able to travel in Egypt because he was a native of Halicarnassus, a city-state that was under Persian domination. Most classical scholars who have studied the evidence doubt that most famous Greeks went there, and suggest that even if they did go there, they did not learn anything about religion or philosophy (Brisson 1987, 153-68; Lefkowitz1997, 75-85). Nothing in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* suggests that Homer had any first-hand knowledge of Egypt; he assigns to it no special characteristics that could distinguish it from any other foreign country that he describes (Lefkowitz1997, 74-5). Although Herodotus sought to establish connections between Egyptian and

Greek religion and ritual, in reality the similarities he found were few and superficial. He is, for example, mistaken when he claims that Pythagoras derived his ideas about the transmigration of the soul from Egypt (Lefkowitz 1997, 62-71). In fact the Egyptians did not believe that the souls of the dead transferred themselves to new bodies, but designed their rituals and incantations to ensure that the life of the individual continued after death.

Philosophy in particular appears to be a purely Greek invention. Although Greek creation myths may have been remotely inspired by the Babylonian Creation Myths, the account of origins of the universe and its components given by Plato and Aristotle is expressed in non-theological terms and in a generalized, abstract vocabulary that has no analogy in the Egyptian language (Burkert 1985, 303-11). In any case, Egyptian texts corresponding to Greek philosophical texts have not yet been discovered, nor is it very likely that they ever will be, because the Egyptians were not interested in exploring such subjects as the nature of the good, or of justice, or of the soul. Rather than questioning what these were, they spent their time investigating how each individual might best conduct him- or herself appropriately in this life so as to be able to survive successfully after death.

The only philosophical texts produced on Egyptian soil are the so-called Hermetic treatises, which contain dialogues in Greek between a god and a disciple. Although they purport to have been written in Egypt at the beginning of time, the Hermetic treatises were in reality composed during the early centuries A.D., long after the Greek settlement was established in Alexandria, and Greek had become the language of government, the courts, and international trade (Fowden 1984, 3-4; Copenhaver 1992, xliii-xlv). Egyptologists have now discovered an Egyptian-language dialogue of Thoth (the Egyptian god associated with Hermes) that also dates from this late period. But even though it appears to have the same outward form as the Greek-language treatises, ideas are expressed and topics discussed in an entirely different way from that of the Greek texts, which use abstractions and deal with the kinds of issues raised in the Greek philosophy of that era (Jasnow and Zauzich 1998, 617-18).

Thus even if the Greek philosophers had gone to Egypt to study with Egyptian priests, as later writers suggested that they did, they would not have learned about philosophy. Even though it is theoretically possible that Plato may have visited Egypt, there is no indication in his surviving works that he knows anything about Egypt that he could not have learned from Herodotus. Plato tells us that Socrates never left Greece, and no ancient source says that Aristotle ever went there. In any case, he could not have sacked the library at Alexandria, because it was not built until about 297 B.C. and Aristotle died in 322 (Lefkowitz 1997, 137, 145)

As for other sciences, the Greeks probably acquired some practical medical knowledge from the Egyptians over the course of time through their contact in trade, but they probably learned about mathematics and astronomy from the Near Eastern peoples with whom they came into frequent contact rather than from the Egyptians (Dalley and Reyes 1998, 104). Egyptian mathematics appears to have had very little direct influence on the work of other ancient Mediterranean peoples (Toomer 1971, 44-45; Palter 1996, 216, 255-56). The Greek

method of mathematical calculation was different from that used in Egypt, and can be distinguished from that of earlier cultures because of its use of abstract terms. Where the Egyptian scribe would present a series of related specific calculations (showing that in principle they knew that they presented a related problem), the Greeks developed the use of theorems to express in abstract terms the principle behind the calculations (Gillings 1972, 233-4).

By contrast, the revisionists claim that virtually everything that the traditionalists believe to have been invented or developed by the Greeks should in reality be attributed to the Egyptians. First of all, they argue, the Egyptians were a great civilization long before the ancestors of the Greeks emigrated to the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the Greeks clearly found Egyptian art inspiring, and copied it in their sculptures and architecture, they could have done so with scientific and philosophical ideas as well. They point out that Herodotus and other Greek writers believed that the names of the gods and certain Greek religious customs came to Greece from Egypt.[4] They make much of the claims by some ancient writers (although in every case writing some centuries after the fact) that famous Greeks studied with Egyptian priests.[5] The revisionists believe that Greeks came to Egypt to study at the universities that were incorporated into the Egyptian Mystery System, and that some of them were even initiated there in Lodges into the Egyptian priesthood.[6]

The revisionists argue that the traditionalists have ignored what Greek writers have said, or have tended to regard their testimony as basically fictional, because of a characteristic Eurocentric unwillingness to give credit to an African civilization for the development of Western thought. To some extent, this criticism is justified. Some European scholars believed that the Egyptians must have been Europeans, or in any case of a different racial stock from other Africans, because they believed that ancient Egyptian civilization was clearly superior to (and therefore different from) other African civilizations of the time. Certainly some scholars of the ancient world have been racist and anti-Semitic. It is also true that Europeans have sought to connect themselves to the ancient Greeks, rather than to the ancient Egyptians, in their architecture, art, science and literature.

But if today virtually all scholars of the ancient world no longer believe that the influence of Egypt on Greece was as great as Herodotus or later Greek writers supposed that it was, it is not because they are unwilling to give credit the Egyptians for these same achievements. It is now widely recognized that the European scholars who thought the Egyptians were Europeans were certainly wrong, and their work has been discredited. Most anthropologists and Egyptologists subscribe to that view that the ancient Egyptians originated from Africa. Scholars of the ancient world have ceased to take Herodotus and his successors *au pied de la lettre* about the debt of Greece to Egypt once they began to be able to read what the ancient Egyptians themselves had to say about their own religion, life, and connections with the rest of the ancient world. They could not have done so before the mid-nineteenth century, because it was only some time after the hieroglyphics had been deciphered (1822) and a grammar and dictionary of the Egyptian language could be published (1836), that Egyptian inscriptions and papyri could be read and analyzed. The revisionists' notion of Egyptian

culture clearly derives from earlier notions of Egypt, based primarily on Greek and Roman sources, which have been shown to offer a fragmentary and often misleading account of Egyptian civilization.[7]

One reason why many people, both black and white, still believe that Egypt is the prototype of Greek civilization is that the idea of Egyptian origins has been preserved in Masonic ritual and mythology, and also in many books about pyramids and their mysteries that derive from these beliefs. The notion that there was an Egyptian mystery system derives from the Masonic initiation ritual. This ritual, although thought to be Egyptian in origin, in reality dates only from historical fiction composed in the eighteenth century. Its source is a description of Egyptian priestly training in *Séthos*, a novel published in 1731 by a French priest, the Abbé Jean Terrasson, who was a professor of Greek at the Sorbonne (Terrasson 1732). The novel, although now completely forgotten, was widely read in France, and almost immediately translated into English and German.

At the time of its publication, and for at least a century after, the account of ancient Egyptian education and initiation in Father Terrasson's novel was widely believed to be authentic, and the rituals he describes were adopted by Masons in Europe. One can get an impression from Schickaneder's libretto to Mozart's *The Magic Flute* of the nature of the initiation ritual, as well as a sense of why it attracted the sympathies of so many people. It is a test of character, an educational journey, and emergence from dark and despair to enlightenment and peace. Ignaz von Born, a member of the same Masonic lodge as Mozart, wrote a treatise exploring the connections between these rituals and ancient Egyptian practices, apparently without realizing that what he supposed to be the ancient evidence also derived from Father Terrasson's account (Hornung 1999, 121-132). Terrasson's description was of course based primarily on ancient Greek and Roman sources, such as Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, which were the only descriptions of Egyptian religion and ritual available at the time (Lefkowitz 1997, 110-21). Father Terrasson in his novel describes in exact detail the curriculum of an imaginary university system in second millennium Egypt, complete with such completely anachronistic appurtenances as laboratories and observatories. This educational system, he claims, became the source of many of the ideas and rituals later thought to originate only with the ancient Greeks. Terrasson portrays the ancient Egyptians as whites, as opposed to black, "savage," Africans (Terrasson 1732, II 25).

Despite its fictional nature and historical anachronism, Terrasson's novel had a wide influence on the development of European rituals. It is the ultimate source of the notion of an Egyptian Mystery System, with its ritual and university components, which is preserved both in Masonic ritual and in the many initiation ceremonies that derive from it. It survives in occult accounts of Egypt, which retain pre-decipherment notions about the mysterious character of hieroglyphics and the secret messages hidden in the arrangement and measurement of the pyramids. It encourages writers to try to establish direct connections between Egyptian ideas from the second millennium B.C. and Greek texts written many centuries later, as if no alteration would have occurred through cultural exchange and over the centuries (Fauvelle 1996, 157). Here, perhaps, is the origin

of the Senegalese theorist Cheikh Anta Diop's account of how Greek initiates into the Mysteries at Heliopolis wrote term papers on Egyptian cosmogonies and mysteries (Diop 1991, 338).

Some influential blacks learned about the "Egyptian" initiation ceremonies and the Mystery System from Masonry. Secret societies were important for oppressed immigrant groups in the United States, and particularly popular among people of African descent, many of whom had participated in such societies also in their homelands (Herskovits 1941, 161-67; Howe 1998, 59-72). Whites in the U.S.A. did not allow blacks to become members of their lodges, but a separate Masonry with similar rites was founded in 1775 for black men by Prince Hall (Grimshaw 1969, 238; Williams 1980, 89; Lefkowitz 1997, 129-30). Through Masonry Egypt appears to have become not merely the source of European culture but a kind of utopia. In 1837 the Rev. Hosea Easton observed that "the Egyptians communicated their arts to the Greeks," whence they were disseminated to the rest of Europe, but he remarked that they had not passed on to the Europeans the generosity and fair-mindedness with which they had governed their neighbors (Easton 1837, 9, 19). In 1853 Martin Delany pointed out the irony that whites excluded black men from Masonic rites that were first established in Egypt and Ethiopia (Delany 1853, 10-11, 13; Walker 2001, 8-9). One of the most important figures in the Afrocentric movement, Marcus Garvey, was initiated as a mason. So was George G.M. James, the author of the widely influential book *Stolen Legacy*, of which there are perhaps 500,000 copies now in print in the U.S.A. (Lefkowitz 1997, 130, 254). In *Stolen Legacy* James describes a university "Mystery System" that serves both to educate and initiate candidates for priesthood (James 1954, 27-53). James also speaks of the several centers of this system as Lodges. The term "lodge" derives from Masonry and other societies that model themselves on it, such as the Brotherhood of Elks (Lefkowitz 1997, 105). Socrates, James believes, was initiated as a Master Mason (James 1954, 2, 89). James' pupil Yosef A.A. ben-Jochannan, offers a complete account of these Masonic Mysteries in ancient Egypt (ben-Jochannan 1991, 204-30).

Unfortunately, this Masonic notion of ancient Egyptian education is not only anachronistic, but almost completely Eurocentric, in that it derives from Greek and Roman sources as interpreted by a Roman Catholic priest in eighteenth-century France. It takes virtually no account of all that scholars have been able to learn about Egypt since the decipherment of hieroglyphics. It is silent about the connections of Egypt to adjacent African civilizations such as Nubia, and does not offer any sense of what distinguishes Egyptian religion and thought from their European counterparts. Yet most ironically, radical Afrocentrists want African-American students to learn about this basically Eurocentric Egypt, because it makes Egypt, rather than Greece, the cradle of Western thought.

There is another reason why Afrocentrists prefer this anachronistic notion of ancient Egypt. First, it portrays ancient Egypt as the original source of all other African civilizations. According to Cheikh Anta Diop, the ancient Egyptians spread their culture and indeed their language to the rest of Africa. His theory mirrors earlier Eurocentric theories of Egyptian origins (Fauvelle 1996, 121-69). The Australian anthropologist Sir Grafton Elliot Smith proposed

that all early civilizations in the world derived their cultures from Egypt. But Elliot Smith did not believe that this remarkable people could have originated in Africa; he wrote that "the smallest infusion of Negro blood immediately manifests itself in a dulling of initiative and the 'drag' on the further development of the arts of civilization"(Howe1998, 115) His colleague at the University of London, W. J. Perry, called these non-African Egyptians the "children of the sun." The term was later (and more appropriately) applied by Afrocentric writers to Africans (Howe1998,57 n.17). The theory of Egyptian origin in turn supports theories of African diffusion into Europe. Were the original settlers of the Eastern Mediterranean Egyptians? Could ancient African blood-lines have survived after Indo-European peoples moved into the Greek peninsula?

Against this background, it seems less implausible to suppose that important Greek figures might have had African ancestors, although no ancient sources mention them. Socrates has been made a candidate for African ancestry because Plato describes him as having a snub nose and thick lips; but these features are not exclusive to Africans. There is no evidence that his family were not Athenians; if they had been, the Athenian comic poets would have been sure to point it out. Other famous persons have been selected because they lived in North Africa, such as Hannibal (who as an aristocratic Carthaginian was almost certainly of Semitic origin, as the reference to the god Ba'al in his name suggests), or Cleopatra VII. Cleopatra's ancestors were all Macedonian Greeks, with one exception: no one knows the identity of her paternal grandmother. She could have been African, or indeed Jewish, but it is far more likely that she was a Macedonian Greek, since if she had been a foreigner some ancient writer would surely have called attention to it (Lefkowitz 1997, 26-43, Walker 2001, 54-56).

If virtually all scholars of the ancient world, whether of Egypt, Greece, or the Near East, regard the Masonic notion of Egypt as unhistorical, and are skeptical about Diop's notion of African diffusionism, the revisionists see these reservations not as an expression of serious academic concern, but as a confirmation of the Eurocentric unwillingness to question received ideas, and, of course, as evidence of Eurocentric racism (Moses 1998, 8). Because any attempt to debate or discuss the historicity of the Afrocentric narrative can be understood as evidence of a conspiracy against Afrocentrism and peoples of African descent, it is unrealistic to assume that arguments based on evidence will be effective against it, at least among those who most desperately want to believe in it, and who derive affirmation and comfort, and even financial support from its continued existence (Pipes 1997, 162).

Conclusion

The basic structure of the Afrocentric narrative derives from a description of ancient Egyptian culture that is anachronistic and (ironically) Eurocentric in nature.[8]As a result, many of the theories this narrative has inspired can be shown to be unhistorical and even fanciful, such as the notion that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egypt. Another problem is its preoccupation with questions of racial (as opposed to cultural) identity. Instead of concentrating

on the many ways in which Mediterranean civilizations influenced each other over a long period of time, it gives priority to the achievements of one particular ancient civilization, mainly because it is African, to the virtual exclusion of other early civilizations, such as those of the ancient Near East.

Nonetheless, because Afrocentrism is being taught in schools and universities and is taken seriously by many people, it presents a challenge that requires an informed response. It is a challenge first of all to the academic integrity of every student of the Eastern Mediterranean, which requires us first to answer charges that we have deliberately misled our students and the general public about the extent of Egyptian influence on Western thought. The challenge is particularly daunting because attempts to discuss and debate the issues are usually met with further accusations and acrimony. It is tempting to try not to be involved in the contest, or somehow to remain above it, even to the extent of suggesting that belief in the Afrocentric narrative might be particularly constructive for young students, and enable them to regard Africa, ancient and modern, in a more positive light. I would argue that this temptation ought to be resisted, however much we may wish to bring about improvements in the lives of many people of African descent. Americans have already had many opportunities to see that teaching history based on illusion can cause lasting damage, particularly if that illusion encourages belief in the evil nature or inferiority of others. Many older history books taught that the European invasion of this continent was an unqualified good for all involved. Afrocentrism merely inverts such Eurocentric racism. But counter-racism is still a form of racism, and as such, must be actively resisted.

Because of the nature of the Afrocentric challenge, and the importance of the historical issues involved, much of the discussion of the Afrocentric narrative has taken the form of a spirited defense of the traditional narrative and the use of warranted evidence. But now that the historical questions have been answered, at least to the satisfaction of those who still believe in the use of evidence, it is important to acknowledge that the Afrocentric challenge, like all challenges, has a positive side as well. It encourages us to review what we know, and to ask some very interesting questions about assumptions that many of us have not troubled to question. It has reminded us that ancient Egypt was an African as well as a Mediterranean civilization, and that most people of European descent have been interested primarily in those aspects of its culture that Europeans have regarded as important in their own cultures: medicine, science, architecture, and art.

It is clearly time to investigate the African side of Egypt as well, and not to be surprised to find that this side has something to teach us. Classicists in particular have tended to compare Egyptian religious thought unfavorably with Hebrew or Greek theology, in part because Egyptian theology is more complex, and notions of metamorphosis more sophisticated than their Greek counterparts. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, scholars have been puzzled or even repelled by the way in which the Egyptians worshiped animals, and sacrificed many of them in respect of their divinity (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, 1858-64). We must try to understand this complex system of belief with greater sympathy, and to

ask whether or not the Egyptians have something to teach us, both about respect for non-human life, and a positive attitude towards death.

In assessing Egyptian accomplishments in mathematics, scholars have tended to adopt a somewhat condescending attitude towards Egyptian methods. They have suggested that the Egyptians were practical men, who could measure accurately, while the Greeks developed abstract theories that made the principles behind the calculations accessible to all. While such assertions are true, they do not tell the whole story. It is clear that while the Egyptian scribes had not developed a special language to describe what they were doing, they did understand that certain types of calculation had universal application, and developed methods and formulas, such as the ratio for determining the circumference of a circle, which closely approximates the value of π (Gillings 1972, 233).

Perhaps the Afrocentric challenge will succeed in encouraging scholars of the ancient Mediterranean to look at all ancient cultures in a more sensitive and sympathetic manner. If it accomplishes that, despite all the anger and exaggerated claims that have been generated by the controversy, it will in the end have had a positive educational function.

Endnotes

1. Revisionist Afrocentric curricula have been adopted in schools in Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and also at some universities, among them Temple University, Kent State, California State at Long Beach, Cornell University, and Wellesley College. For details and bibliography, see Lefkowitz 1997, 240-41.
2. On defensive strategies employed by Afrocentrists, see McWhorter 2000, 54-5. In my own case, every motive has been attributed to me other than the real one, which is respect for historical evidence: for example, refusal to question received ideas, Poe 1997, xiv; racism, Asante 1999, 61; racism and ignorance of Greek (!), Obenga 2001, 49-51, 117; desire to defend "the Glory that was Greece" against "inter-continental hybridity," Bernal 2001, 10. Absurdly, Obenga accuses me of mistranslating a word that does not occur in the passage in which I am supposed to have mistranslated it. And I said just the opposite of what Bernal supposes that I believe in Lefkowitz 1997a, 17.
3. See esp. Ortiz De Montellano 1991, 49 on the influential theories of Adams 1987, S 52-53, Finch 1983, 140-41, and Finch 1990, 124-25.
4. There is no linguistic evidence for Herodotus' claims that the names of all the gods came to Greece from Egypt; Assmann 2000, 32 suggests that the Egyptian priests must have described their gods to him using the names of their Greek analogues (e.g., Zeus/Ammon, Athena/Neith).
5. Obenga 2001, 117 tries to argue that Plato's pupil Hermodorus wrote about his trip to Egypt; but in fact Diogenes Laertius (3.6) cites Hermodorus

only as the source of a story that Plato went to Megara (near Athens) to study with Euclid. Obenga does not point out that in the same passage Diogenes says Plato traveled to Egypt in the company of Euripides, although Euripides had been dead for several years at the time the journey was supposed to have taken place.

6. Asante 2000, 79-80 argues for the existence of an Egyptian mystery system by relying on a tendentious mistranslation of the passage where Strabo (first cent. B.C.) describes how the priests taught Plato and Eudoxus in the fourth century (17.1.29), and by claiming that in order to conceal truths the priests used "systems" that are in fact mentioned only in the Kabala and other medieval sources (!).

7. Bernal in particular insists that all modern scholarship is in error; most recently, in Bernal 2001a he restates Herodotus' ideas about the Egyptian origin of Greek religion, as if they had not repeatedly been shown by Egyptologists to be mistaken ; see, e.g., Assmann 2000, 25-26.

8. See esp. Walker 2001, 4: "Afrocentrism is Eurocentrism in blackface."

Note: this is an updated version of an article that was published as – "Le monde antique vu par les afrocentristes," in *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, edd. F-X. Fauvelle-Aymar, Jean-Pierre Chrétien et Claude-Hélène Perrot (Paris: Karthala, 2000): 229-48.

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